

The 'Robert Greene' Method of Writing Books

The 4 steps used by a 5-times–bestselling writer



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A common saying states that before dying, you need to write a book, raise a kid and plant a tree. Even though life is not about going over a checklist, this saying conveys the importance we give, as a society, to the act of writing a book. It's up there, together with raising a kid.

What we see, though, is way more children born per year than books being written, which says a lot about the difficulty of both activities. Writing is something extremely hard to do and with a non-linear complexity: it increases faster than the size of the project. In another words, writing a piece 2x as long is not just 2x as difficult, but, say, 3 or 4 times.

Being able to write a facebook post is sensibly different from writing a school essay; which is not the same as composing a blog post. Let's not even put writing a book on the same page, because it's orders of magnitude more difficult.

To help navigate through such complex waters, we could sure use an experienced guide, with a replicable method of proven results. Who better than Robert Greene, author of five bestsellers and arguably the greatest strategist of our generation?

The guy is a non-fiction beast, author of *The 48 Laws of Power*, *33 Strategies of War*, *The Art of Seduction*, *The 50th Law* and *Mastery*. Urgh, I'm tired just writing it all. Robert is surely the person I want in my corner when it comes down to writing non-fiction and we already know his apprentice went on to write bestsellers and be successful.

Although Robert never wrote about his method publicly — in general, he prefers books over blog posts — I was able to capture the essence of his creative process researching through several interviews with him. Putting the puzzle together, piece by piece, what follows is how he writes books.

1. Develop the Beginner's Mind

Robert is not just the author of multiple bestsellers. As I said, he is one of the most brilliant minds alive and that's why he understand the success traps. In his interviews, he likes to emphasize that, in each book, he's back to square one. As said in *48 Laws of Power*:

There's nothing more intoxicating than victory, and nothing more dangerous.

It would be so easy for him, with established worldwide fame and prestige, to step in his previous successes to write more-of-the-same books and convert all the attention in cheap money. Just like Robert Kiyosaki did with his 942357 books about “Rich dad”. But no, in the process of writing a new book, he's a layman developing his research.

...you can't just keep repeating what you did on the past. It's not about the attention you're getting, it's about the work itself that should be motivating you. So, each book that I do, which would be the equivalent of each business that perhaps an entrepreneur enters into, is a new challenge. I'm not going to repeat what I did in the past, I'm not just going to do the same formulas.

— Robert, in this interview

If you want to build anything valuable, that mind, open, with no preconceptions, ready to be modeled by knowledge, needs to be cultivated. This way, not only will you be less prone to develop biased views (getting away from the Truth), but your creativity will be unbounded by pre-fixed ideas. As the master zen Shunryu Suzuki said: “*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few*”.

2. Everything Begins With a Good Research

Schopenhauer once said there are two types of writer: those who write because they have something they have to say and those who write for the sake of writing. Unless you've already lived a truly, spectacular life, the thing you'll write about is third-party knowledge. Guess what's the best way to master that kind of knowledge? Yes, reading, and reading *a lot*.

Discussing the production of his next book (tentatively called “The Laws of Human Nature”), which is still 12-24 months in the future, **Robert told that he reads 300-400 whole books** to research for each work. This is more books than people are used to read in (several) lifetimes.

How can he process such a huge amount of information during the research period? It's necessary to create a method to extract the most out of each book. Robert uses a system based on flashcards, where he puts the most important ideas he stumbles upon in the book.

“I read a book, very carefully, writing on the margins with all kinds of notes. A few weeks later I return to the book, and transfer my scribbles on to note cards, each card representing an important theme in the book.”

— Robert, in this *Reddit AMA*

In a few words, **the basis for the better knowledge retention is in a more significant interaction with the book**, through the centuries-old practice called *marginalia*: taking notes, highlighting, commenting and criticising the work as you read it. It's the practical application of a concept already used in classrooms called **elaborative interrogation**.

With positive effects already verified, the elaborative interrogation consists in asking the student why such topic makes sense or why it is unexpected. This stimulates the formation of more elaborated networks around the knowledge, connecting the new material to what the student already know, making it stick longer. In a way, that's exactly what you do when interacting more actively with what you're reading.

Another important point: you need to do something with those notes, which Robert Greene turns into a commonplace book (Robert's ex-apprentice, Ryan Holiday, wrote about them here). Another old age practice — Marco Aurelius, Petrarch, Montaigne, Ronald Reagan and several other historical figures kept one— it contains the best quotes, excerpts and aphorisms one can extract from the books he's reading.

What his system lacks in technology (Robert uses paper and pen), it compensates with utility, allowing him to keep mountains of only the most important facts and ideas

while reading so much.

3. Rearrange and Connect

One third of the effort is done when you *truly* know about theme you are supposed to write about. Another third of the energy is invested in rearranging and connecting ideas in a way that makes sense and leads the reader towards the comprehension you want him to create.

For instance, if you want to write a more practical book, for a larger audience, it'll be necessary to compose the technical aspects briefly (which may come from a couple of books) and in accessible language, surrounded by a lot of practical examples from the daily life (which may come from *dozens* of books). If you're extracting lessons from history, as *33 strategies of war* and *48 laws of power* do, it's essential to populate the work with a lot of historical passages and anecdotes to prove your point.

There are several ways to build and keep a commonplace book, and the way Robert does it is especially useful when it's time to rearrange and connect ideas. But if you don't like Robert's style, there's plenty of other options. You can do it linearly as a reading journal. You can go all technological and use note-taking tools such as Evernote or OneNote to keep your records, which allows for better speed and search.

In Robert's case, he writes every important idea/passage/aphorism on a card, categorizing by theme. When the book he's reading is good, it can generate 20~30 cards. By the end of the research period (300-400 books later), he has accumulated 3000-4000 cards, on average.

“I'm able to break a book down that can be chaotic. So, for instance, for this new book, I have loved Nietzsche a lot (this is a book about the Übermensch, my next book) and there's a book that I've read from him, an early book called

“Human all too human”, that’s just the most amazing book, but it is chaotic, it’s all over the place. He’s got all this aphorisms and these thoughts, it’s just like entering a rats maze. I, with my cards, can organize all of his ideas and all of this thoughts, bring some order and show you the amazing pros of wisdom this guy has gleaned out of his mad, syphilic brain.”

— Robert, in this podcast

After defining the chapter themes, he aggregates the cards more or less around those themes. Then, he aggregates the cards inside each chapter again around the sections of the chapter. From there, it’s just a matter of writing per se. In a way, we can see it as an alternative version of Ray Bradbury’s idea of setting up words/ideas upfront to create the text later.

4. Write intensely

With a structured summary and ideas at hand, the last third of effort goes into the writing process (which is shared between author and editor, maybe 9:1). Several factors come into play, such as discipline, routine and even style. Almost every important writer in history has already written about writing.

For instance, for Robert (as we can infer safely from his works), Kurt Vonnegut’s principles seem attractive: write about what you care, do not ramble, keep it simple and have the guts to cut out. Just as Stephen King’s on simplicity and the avoidance of adverbs.

On this journey, there are those who recommends planned writing, with work time scheduled in advance. And there are those to whom the flow matters more, preaching “non-stop writing” when possible. It’s even a modern debate whether all the process is

even enjoyable; great names are used to discuss whether writing is a torture for the artist or not .

To Robert, when it's time to get his hands dirty, he works in long periods of time and I infer from his commentaries that it's a painful process, since he mentions he's not a really cool person to be around on those moments.

“I’m not usually writing, because my books require so much research. So, right now, I’m in a research period, when I’m reading voraciously books about human nature, psychology, etc. And then, in about a year, I’m gonna start writing and then I go on to a kind of a different routine when I’m more craze and hard to be around.”

— Robert, in this podcast

Does It Seem Too Hard For You?

Such as reading, writing is a magical process that, in a way, connects us with our human nature. There's something intrinsically human in the desire of telling histories, of sharing a little of our knowledge, of our lives with other human beings.

The process can be excruciating, but it doesn't mean it's not within your reach. It's a cliché, but the saying “a long journey begins with a simple step” is true. Even the Masters, with worldwide fame and books that echoes through the eternity, began a little movement in the right direction. There's nothing more fit than leaving you with this inspiring Nietzsche's quote, extracted from the last page of Robert's latest book *Mastery*.

“Because we think well of ourselves, but nonetheless never suppose ourselves capable of producing a painting like one of Raphael's or a dramatic scene like one of Shakespeare's, we convince ourselves that the capacity to do so is quite

extraordinarily marvelous, a wholly uncommon accident, or, if we are still religiously inclined, a mercy from on high.

Thus our vanity, our self-love, promotes the cult of the genius: for only if we think of him as being very remote from us, as a miraculum, does he not aggrieve us... But, aside from these suggestions of our vanity, the activity of the genius seems in no way fundamentally different from the activity of the inventor of machines, the scholar of astronomy or history, the master of tactics.

All these activities are explicable if one pictures to oneself people whose thinking is active in one direction, who employ everything as material, who always zealously observe their own inner life and that of others, who perceive everywhere models and incentives, who never tire of combining together the means available to them.

Genius too does nothing but learn first how to lay bricks then how to build, and continually seek for material and continually form itself around it. **Every activity of man is amazingly complicated, not only that of the genius: but none is a ‘miracle.’**”

— Friedrich Nietzsche
